

HOMEOPATHY, OTHER FORMS OF ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE SOURCES OF ONGOING DEBATE AMONG PHYSICIANS, PATIENTS

Amy Rosen

In Brief • En bref

Amy Rosen is the 1994 winner of the Amy Chouinard Memorial Essay Contest. Named in memory of longtime CMAJ and *Canadian Journal of Surgery* contributor Amy Chouinard, the competition is intended to stimulate interest in medical and health-related writing among journalism students. The winning essay examines the growing public interest in homeopathic medicine and physicians' opinions of the trend.

Amy Rosen est la lauréate de 1994 du prix commémoratif de rédaction Amy Chouinard. Nommé en l'honneur d'Amy Chouinard, qui a collaboré longtemps au JAMC et au *Journal canadien de chirurgie*, ce concours vise à intéresser les étudiants en journalisme au domaine de la médecine et de la santé. L'auteur du texte choisi examine l'intérêt croissant que suscite dans le public la médecine homéopathique et les avis des médecins au sujet de cette tendance.

The Amy Chouinard Memorial Essay Contest is open to all students registered in a recognized journalism program at a Canadian college or university.

What would you do if you woke up one morning and your voice was gone — you couldn't even whisper? In 1990 this happened to Joanna Sugar, who felt her throat constricting one night while studying for final exams at McGill University in Montreal. Then 20, Joanna woke the next morning to find her voice had disappeared. "I thought it was strange, but I thought it was just a throat infection or nerves," she recalls.

A week later, after finishing her exams, she packed up her apartment and moved home to Toronto for the sum-

mer. Her voice still hadn't returned. She visited an otolaryngologist, who determined that the right vocal cord was paralyzed, preventing the vibration needed to produce sound.

Her mother, Andrea Sugar, suggested that she see a chiropractor. "It wasn't a good experience," Joanna says of that visit. "He asked me some questions, manipulated my back in a few areas, cracked my jaw, and felt around a bit."

The chiropractor didn't explain what he thought was wrong, but "said that by the following Thursday my voice would be back. He said he fixed what was wrong." But her voice didn't come back.

Her mother had been studying alternative medical treatments such as homeopathy and recommended that Joanna visit a herbalist in Toronto's Chinatown. "The herbalist needed a

translator," says Joanna. "He held my left wrist, put his hand on my pulse, and began to ask me all sorts of questions."

Eventually he prescribed "this concoction made from roots and flowers and bark, with instructions saying to add six cups of water, and boil it down to a cup." After boiling it became brown and thick. "I took one sip and knew there was no way I could drink it. So that didn't work."

Getting more discouraged, Joanna went to several other physicians, who performed tests such as a computed-tomography scan and a laryngoscopy. But still she had no answers, and no voice. Four months later she had a severe head cold, and when her head cleared her voice returned.

All's well that ends well, but Joanna says neither of the treatment paths she took helped her: "The conventional medicine didn't alarm me, it didn't comfort me, and it didn't make me any better, and the homeopathic things that I went through were sort of interesting and a novelty, but I wasn't terribly comfortable with [them]."

Homeopathy has long been considered a fringe medicine, but it isn't a passing fad. It was the brainchild of Samuel Hahnemann, a German physician who formulated its principles in the late 1700s. Hahnemann was distressed by some then-popular medical practices, including bloodletting and purging. Instead, he prescribed alter-

Amy Rosen received a bachelor of journalism degree from the University of King's College in Halifax in May 1994.

natives such as nourishing diets and fresh air. He also experimented with different drugs, often taking the medicine himself and documenting its effects. Such experiments, which Hahnemann called "provings," led to his first principle of homeopathy — the "law of similars."

Homeopathy employs a variety of herbs, drugs and chemicals in minute quantities. It is based on Hahnemann's theory that if a substance can produce illness in a healthy person, a tiny quantity of it can cure that same illness in a sick person. Homeopaths claim this type of treatment can do no harm; whether it does any good is another question.

For many doctors it's an annoyance — a wishy-washy collection of different types of treatments that lack the scientific base of Western medicine. Toronto endocrinologist Max Breen (a pseudonym has been used at his request) opposes homeopathic medicine and thinks its practitioners are "quacks."

"It's not science," says Breen. "It's not scientific. It doesn't use scientific methods to get results. Instead, it uses anecdotal evidence."

He favours controlled, prospective, double-blind studies. "You do a large group of patients," says Breen, "and then you analyse the results. It's a very expensive, time-consuming process, and depending on the disease it may take years and millions of dollars to find the results."

Breen says he hates seeing people waste their money on useless remedies. "People are always looking for a fast cure. They don't realize that sometimes things get better by themselves. But they attribute it to the drug they were given, even though it didn't actually cause the cure."

And there can be negative consequences. Breen cited the case of a 50-year-old patient who was advised by a homeopath to take iodine drops; the woman developed an overactive thyroid gland, and is now suing the homeopath.

Breen is alarmed that some people employ bits and pieces of homeopathic trivia in treating themselves and their friends. "Another woman who has an overactive thyroid came to me," says Breen. "She listened to some of her friends and took to eating kelp, which is high in natural iodine." As a result, he couldn't give her the radioactive iodine treatment she needed. "What I want to know," he says, "is when did these 'friends' get their medical degrees?"

Dr. David Baker and Dr. William LaValley run the Medical Wellness

about 13 years ago. He used to work in the mines in Northern Ontario, and changed his diet when he started working underground. "I quit smoking and drinking, and my body started changing — I was sleeping better and feeling better," he says.

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Centre of the Maritimes in Chester, NS, practising homeopathy on their 5000 patients from across Atlantic Canada.

In 1993, the Medical Services Insurance (MSI) board investigated their billing practices. Finding no impropriety, officials handed the case over to the medical board, saying they were concerned with the physicians' practices.

Jason Hofman, a medical researcher who leads the organization Citizens for Choice in Health Care, says Baker and LaValley were being persecuted solely because they practise homeopathy. "Seemingly, they're being accused of being homeopaths. . . . In the words of the MSI complaints, their patients are inadequate patients." In other words, says Hofman, the patients are not really sick, despite the symptoms they may feel.

Sterling McCaan, manager of the Great Ocean Specialty and Natural Foods store in Halifax, became interested in homeopathy as a hobby

McCaan thinks education is the key to understanding homeopathy. His store tries to help people teach themselves. "There's a lot of information out there," he says. "Sifting through it is the hard part."

In addition to information and self-diagnosis books and a homeopathic encyclopedia set entitled *Dictionary of Practical Material and Medicine*, Great Ocean maintains a bulletin board that lists homeopathic practitioners, acupuncturists and herbalists.

Many homeopathic practitioners avoid conventional medicine because they believe they are teaching their clientele a better, healthier way to treat their illnesses. "As long as you're warm and breathing, you can turn your health around," says chiropractor and naturopath Verna Hunt, who is a director of the Canadian Naturopathic Association. "You don't have to be sick to get better," she adds. "I propose that health is more than just the absence of a pathologic disease."

Many people seem to agree. A US study of the prevalence, cost and pat-

terns of use of alternative medicine (Unconventional medicine in the United States. *N Engl J Med* 1993; 328: 246-252) found that 34% of Americans — more than 60 million people — had used some sort of alternative care in 1990. Data revealed there were more visits to unconventional healers (including chiropractors and acupuncturists) than to primary care physicians such as family doctors, general practitioners, pediatricians and general internal medicine specialists. A minority (34%) of those using alternative healing made an appointment with a practitioner. And 96% of people who sought unconventional treatments also consulted a medical doctor. (This did not mean the physician knew about the unconventional treatment; 72% of respondents had not told their medical doctor that they were also using alternative therapy. — Ed.) The study also found that well-educated people were more likely to use medicines and therapies outside the mainstream.

Andrea Sugar recently went to a Chinese herbalist because she was experiencing symptoms such as fatigue, sleeplessness and back pain — conditions that tend to be chronic, may not be aided by traditional medicine, or could require long-term medication. Sugar thought she developed the problems because she was premenopausal, but her herbalist told her that as people age they allow themselves to believe they're "falling apart," when all they really need is a different approach. He prescribed meditation. She doesn't do it regularly, but she claims that when she meditates at home or in her yoga class it calms her. "And now I feel fabulous," she says.

Sugar paid \$35 for each of her two 90-minute sessions. "I wouldn't go to a herbalist if I was troubled with a serious medical problem," she adds. "I would go to a doctor first. But I have an open mind."

Hunt believes a body has the ability to repair itself, but must be given

the materials to work with. "Our level of health is affected by genetic potential and environmental factors. The environmental factors we can sometimes control. Where choice is involved, we must work on such factors as nutritional habits, occupational habits, mental focus, exercise and rest and postural habits."

One of the natural herbs Hunt recommends is dandelion, which she says stimulates the liver and kidneys, two important parts of the body's cleansing mechanism. She adds that milk thistle also supports the body's detoxification process, protects the liver from toxin damage and may repair damage. In Europe, extract of milk thistle seed is used to treat cirrhosis caused by excessive drinking.

Hunt concedes that pharmaceutical drugs are important, but says there is also a place for natural healing. "Don't come to me if you [have an acute problem]," says Hunt, "but in a lot of cases natural herbs do the job. And I would use them if other treatments didn't work."

Hunt says she teaches her clients lifestyle management. "I'm mainly a coach with them. My job is to educate and coach. They heal themselves."

There are more than 200 naturopaths practising in Ontario, and that's just about 200 too many for Dr. Howard Seiden. In a *Toronto Star* article, Seiden stated: "While I am the first to admit that likely the majority of physician/patient encounters have little or no proven benefit to the patient, the scientific basis for unconventional healing in most instances simply does not exist."

"Remember," he says. "The healer who treats himself has a fool for a patient."

Not all doctors feel this way, and perhaps today's medical students will ultimately decide what role homeopathy and other forms of alternative health care will play in the Canadian health care system.

Janet Press, a medical student at Dalhousie University (a pseudonym

has been used at her request), says homeopathy isn't taught in medical school today and the curriculum is not likely to change in the near future. Press did a medical rotation with a doctor in Halifax who isn't a homeopath but strongly believes in homeopathy's healing powers. Press says it was interesting to see patients' reactions to the different treatments. "Many of them went to this physician because a lot of their symptoms were being ignored by other doctors — fatigue symptoms for example," she says. "This doctor made them feel good because they liked the fact that someone was listening to them and was willing to try something a little different."

With the popularity of homeopathy on the upswing, Press and her classmates are going to have to make choices about whether or not to be part of the trend.

Press has drawn her own conclusion. "I think it is something we shouldn't ignore," she says. "I think [there is] some basis to it. But I wouldn't put all my eggs in that basket." ■

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